

From CLASSROOM to COMBAT



First Lt. Erik Axt taxis out for a flight from Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. His first familiarization flight in country turned out to be a combat mission, providing close air support to an Army unit.

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photos by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

The last thing 1st Lt. Erik Axt wanted to do was make a mistake. When his finger squeezed the trigger of a seven-barrel Gatling gun, 30 mm rounds exploded from his A-10 Thunderbolt II and thudded dangerously close to friendly forces under attack by the enemy in Afghanistan.

The young lieutenant, the newest pilot assigned to the 81st Expeditionary Fighter Squadron at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, knew he would eventually have to fight in combat. But he didn't expect it during his first sortie! For the Texas native, what began as a routine familiarization flight turned into a heart-pounding combat mission.

Earlier in the year over another desert hot spot, Senior Airman Shonna Golbek was in a conflict of her own. The newest member in the 908th Expeditionary Refueling Squadron, she struggled to control her nerves as the newly trained boom operator refueled fighter aircraft over a war zone — in the inkiness of night — for the first time.

"I was afraid I'd make a mistake, freeze up or be unable to do my job," she said.

It's a concern many Air Force members face when they make the transition from the classroom to combat. Airman Golbek and Lieutenant Axt are representative of the many airmen presented a training certificate, closely followed by a flack vest and a weapon, and orders for Operation Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom.

Before Airman Golbek first set foot into a KC-135 Strato-tanker, or even entered the Air Force, she wanted to be a boom operator. At 24, she decided to change her life and join because it offered job security and benefits her civilian jobs had yet to match.

"Young people don't realize what the Air Force has to offer," said the Oklahoma native.

While awaiting a boom operator slot to open so she could attend basic training, 9-11 occurred.

"I wished I had already been involved with the military when it happened. I wanted to be a part of it," she said.

After graduating from basic training in January 2002, she attended technical school and a slew of other courses before receiving orders to her first base, McConnell Air Force Base, Kan., in August 2002.

She became a full-fledged boom operator in November that same year. With a head full of knowledge, she left the nest



During her first two years in the Air Force, Senior Airman Shonna Golbek has seen action in the desert three times and has earned three air medals and an air achievement medal for combat support.

photo illustration by Patrick Harris



over the plains of Kansas to fly on her own.

“There was no ceremony or anything. They just kicked me out the door,” she said.

Her first overseas mission was a nine-day temporary duty assignment to Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England, where she pulled alert duty for a visit by President George W. Bush. Although her skills weren’t needed, she found the deployment enjoyable. Then, on only her second deployment, she found herself peering through night vision goggles refueling fighters over a war zone.

“I was worried about our plane getting shot at,” she said. Like the rest of the crew, she had to do her job and keep an eye out for ground fire.

“When I first started, I relied on my training because that was all I had. I was book smart,” she said. “In combat, I received hands-on, realistic experiences. During war I spend more time in jets and gain more experience.” During

her deployment, she flew nearly every day.

In her first two years in the Air



Col. Thomas Groznik, 455th Expeditionary Operations Group commander, lands at Bagram. As an A/O-10A Thunderbolt II pilot, he’s responsible for close air support of ground fighting forces, like what Lieutenant Axt provided on his first combat mission.”

Force, Airman Golbek has deployed three times to the desert and has earned three air medals and an air achievement medal for combat support. However, it all started with boomer school at Altus Air Force Base, Okla.

After 9-11, it took very little to motivate students to learn, according to Senior Master Sgt. Todd Salzman, 19th Air Force enlisted training manager for Air Education and Training Command boom operators.

“When I was a trainer, we used Desert Storm as our examples,” Sergeant Salzman said. “After 9-11, our trainers are telling students, ‘This is what you’re going to be doing.’ Students are getting [up-to-date] training and applying it in an operational setting.”

After academic training, many career fields require more supervised hands-on training, followed by mission qualification training at the first unit. For Lieutenant Axt, that training included a month and a half of combat mission qualification training before his Afghanistan deployment.

After getting settled at Bagram, the lieutenant was scheduled for an A-10 orientation flight with his commander, Lt. Col. Pat Malackowski. While walking to their jets, they learned that friendly troops had come into contact with enemy fire. He and his boss were asked to provide close air support, the bulk of all A-10 missions during the war.

“My main concern was that once we got to the situation on the ground, I wanted to make sure I was hitting the right guys,” he said.

Colonel Malackowski led the way and marked the target. Radio chatter increased. Lieutenant Axt found it hard to listen to all the voices at once.

“I rolled in with the gun, and then he rolled in with the gun. We were told we had performed good hits from the tactical ground controller on the ground,” said the 2000 Air Force Academy graduate.

Enemy fire ceased after their gun pass. It was effective use of fire power.

“I was surprisingly calm,” he remembered. “Mission accomplished. There’s nothing more rewarding for me than to provide support for the Army.”

“On his first opportunity in combat, he was asked to do the most difficult thing for a new pilot — engage the enemy without hurting the friendlies close by,” his commander said. “It was a really solid mission.”

After returning from their deployments, Lieutenant Axt and Airman Golbek, who has since redeployed to the desert, know they have what it takes to get the job done under combat conditions. They are school trained and combat-tested.

After a year in the career field, Airman Golbek hopes she can one day be a boom operator instructor, which will allow her to tell war stories to the newest boomers, and keep the training real. ✪

Staff Sgt. Russell Wicke, 455th Expeditionary Operations Group Public Affairs, contributed to this article.